

A VA Emergency Fix

Gainesville Sun

Published July 6, 2005

Editorial

<http://www.gainesville.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050706/EDITORIALS/207060302/1096/today>

A billion dollars here, \$1.5 billion there and pretty soon - to paraphrase the late Sen. Everett Dirksen, R-Ill. - you're talking about a real shortfall in the Department of Veterans Affairs' budget.

Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson spent a good part of last week trying to explain away why the agency needed an emergency appropriation of \$1.5 billion to cover the deficit in its medical-care budget this fiscal year.

And he'll need \$1 billion on top of that to make up for an underprojection in the 2006 budget.

The growing deficit, generated in part by thousands of wounded soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, should have come as no surprise.

Fred Malphurs, director of the veterans' network for North Florida and South Georgia, told The Sun's Washington bureau that he told the department nine months ago that his 11 hospitals would be \$108 million over budget for this year.

"It's no surprise to me," he said.

Seven months after Malphurs raised the red flag, Sen. Patty Murphy, D-Wash., attempted to add \$2 billion to the VA's 2005 budget. The attempt was beaten back by Republican senators.

Nicholson had told Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, chairwoman of the Military Construction and Veteran Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee in a letter that the additional money wasn't needed.

Last week, Murphy asked Nicholson, "Do you have a problem?" Nicholson, apparently still in denial, replied: "We certainly don't have a crisis."

Millions of veterans around the country no doubt view it as a crisis. There are thousands of them on waiting lists (nearly 8,000 in the North Florida-South Georgia district alone) for appointments.

They more likely have the view expressed by Rep. Lane Evans, D-Ill., the ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and a Vietnam veteran: "This is certainly a problem and definitely a crisis."

The explanation for this would be almost laughable if it wasn't so serious. In February 2004, the House Veterans Affairs Committee held its first hearing on the VA's budget for the 2005 fiscal year.

Then-VA Secretary Anthony J. Principi told committee members that the VA had asked for \$1.2 billion more in its budget than the White House approved.

Congressional Quarterly, a congressional-reporting service, said the revelation "stunned many veterans' groups and staff aides, who say that legislators routinely ask how much the department has sought from the White House Office of Management and Budget, but rarely get a straight answer."

Principi resigned in early December.

Nicholson, however, blamed the shortfall on the VA's system the department uses to project health care costs. He said projections are based on a three-year lag time, so that the fiscal 2005 budget used data from 2002.

The explanation didn't set well with many congressional members.

"We have computers for crying out loud," said Rep. Michael Bilirakis, R-Fla., chairman of the Veterans Affairs Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee. "Can't we do better than that?"

On the Senate side, Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., wasn't happy that the VA's previous statements that money wasn't a problem had caused him and

others to vote against an increase in the VA's budget this spring: "I am not happy that we were put in a position to vote against an amendment that we now find out was needed, but we got bad information."

According to congressional testimony, there were 335 VA patients for every VA doctor in 2000. At the end of the 2004 fiscal year in September, that ratio had increased to 531 to 1.

That ratio, among other statistics, caused the Government Accountability Office, the auditing arm of Congress, to issue a report in September saying the VA "does not have sufficient capacity to meet the needs of new combat veterans while still providing for veterans of past wars."

The Senate voted 96-0 before adjourning for the Fourth of July holiday to appropriate an additional \$1.5 billion for the department; the House voted 419-0 to approve \$975 million.

Several senators said they wanted to stick with the larger appropriation, which gives the VA the authority to carry unspent funds into the 2006 fiscal year starting Oct. 1.

The mission statement of the VA is taken from Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address: "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

It's time to take it seriously.